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Cook it, eat it, Skype it: Mobile media use in re-staging intimate culinary practices among transnational families

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Abstract:	<p>This article discusses video-based platforms as drivers of transconnective spaces for transnational families to do familyhood. By looking at how Italians living in London use Skype to restage family rituals at a distance, I examine the centrality of culinary practices in relation to family work. In doing this, I also expand on the role of polymedia environments in enabling emotional proximity and the formation of a sense of mediated co-presence within transnational contexts. In-depth interviews were conducted with members of the Facebook group Italian Gals in London to unpack how lived geographies of migration intersect with media technologies and practices to create a new transconnective habitus around food preparation, cooking and dining. The study reveals that while Skype provides emotional connectivity, communicative challenges and tensions can also occur as a result of the 'ephemerality' of video calls and as technological asymmetries emerge among transnational family members.</p>

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Abstract

This article discusses video-based platforms as drivers of transconnective spaces for transnational families to do familyhood. By looking at how Italians living in London use Skype to *restage* family rituals at a distance, I examine the centrality of culinary practices in relation to family work. In doing this, I also expand on the role of polymedia environments in enabling emotional proximity and the formation of a sense of mediated co-presence within transnational contexts. In-depth interviews were conducted with members of the Facebook group *Italian Gals in London* to unpack how lived geographies of migration intersect with media technologies and practices to create a new *transconnective habitus* around food preparation, cooking and dining. The study reveals that while Skype provides emotional connectivity, communicative challenges and tensions can also occur as a result of the ‘ephemerality’ of video calls and as technological asymmetries emerge among transnational family members.

Introduction

I feel like I don’t belong here, nor I belong to Italy anymore. It is the existential crisis of the migrant, I think. However, [technology, *author’s note*] makes you forget, at least for a moment, that you are far away. Distance does not matter anymore (Anna, interview with the author)

The quote above is from Anna, a 50 years old Professor from Calabria, in southwest Italy. She recently moved to London from New York in order to live closer to her relatives in Italy, a country she left more than twenty years ago. She calls her mother and her aunt every evening after dinner because, she says, ‘it’s almost like a survival instinct and a necessity for me and for them. It’s the idea of staying in touch that makes me feel better, in a way reassured, even if it’s only virtual’. She associates this ‘survival instinct’ to a set of familial obligations she feels are related to her being ‘the only daughter and the only nephew’ who left and never returned. Anna’s words allow me to present the core argument of, and inspiration behind, the research here discussed. In *skyping* home as part of her daily routines, Anna becomes protagonist of a performative architecture of love and of familial togetherness that is uniquely shaped and enhanced by digital media. More than simply a communication tool, Skype is used to recreate a *sense of mediated co-presence* among geographically-separated individuals through the (re)-enactment of family rituals that were once performed in physical togetherness.

In discussing the role of technology in helping migrants to bridge socio-spatial distance, I echo King-O’Riain’s argument that Skype’s technical affordances deeply affect migrants’ transnational relationships in multiple and often contradictory ways (2015). From this, I here mainly look at how Skype enables the creation of trans-connective spaces for transnational families to do familyhood through the re-staging of family rituals and most especially around food preparation, cooking and dining. In noting how powerful “digital evocations of home through food” are (Hegde, 2016:71), the research here presented insinuates how problematic and ambiguous these transnational circuits can also be. While Skype enables emotional connectivity, communicative challenges and tensions can occur as a result of the ‘ephemerality’ of video calls and as technological asymmetries emerge among transnational

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3 family members. This is supported by previous research outlining how media use not only
4 mitigates some of the difficulties associated with living apart thanks to their temporal and
5 spatial simultaneity (Paragas, 2009), but also inevitably remind migrants of the ‘illusion of
6 co-presence’ (Madianou and Miller, 2011), thus exacerbating feelings of nostalgia and
7 loneliness (see also Cabalquinto, 2018; Cabanes and Acedera, 2012; Chib et al., 2014).
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9

10 This study reflects the author’s long-standing scholarly interest in the politics and materiality
11 of migration. In exploring the multiple ways Italian migrants engage with and use digital
12 technologies, I have been mapping a complex scenario where different platforms are used for
13 different social and emotional needs (author, 2015a, 2015b; 2014). In looking at how these
14 needs are performed in often creative ways, previous research has also uncovered the
15 complexities of food within processes of community bonding among migrants (author, 2017).
16 This paper brings such interest a step further and identifies the centrality of mediated culinary
17 practices in rekindling connections through sharing recipes and cooking at a distance; in
18 enabling social capital and in performing commensality at a distance. From here, my
19 research intends to contribute to existing literature on media, migration and food by
20 introducing the concept of a *transconnective habitus*, a connective and connected
21 transnational everyday reality where families can renew their intimate bond around food
22 preparation, cooking and dining.
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27 Methodology

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29 This study purposely concentrated on a small number of participants in order to gain insights
30 into the material politics of diasporic life and to possibly reveal emerging themes of interest
31 to be researched and developed further. 10 in-depth interviews were conducted either face to
32 face or through digital means such as Skype between 2017 and 2018. Participants were
33 recruited online within the Facebook group *Italian Gals in London*, where I posted a
34 description of the project following the admin’s approval. To date, the group has 1875
35 members and only accepts female users who are Italian (or speak Italian) and live in London.
36 This group was selected as a relatively new online community that interestingly only caters
37 for female migrants and which the author initially joined as a member. Before I delve further
38 into the study, two considerations should be made.
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42 First, it is important to note that this research is limited insofar as its findings can only be
43 evaluated within the parameters of the community here observed, which has restricted the
44 recruitment phase to women only. The author is aware that this selection bias can further
45 reiterate the link often made between culinary practices, domestic spaces and women,
46 together with the assumption that female migrants tend to communicate with their
47 transnational parents more frequently than men (Wellman and Haythornthwaite, 2008). As
48 Hegde also explains, the link between food and domesticity has often been gendered,
49 especially in diasporic context (2016:70). While this aspect has been acknowledged, the
50 present discussion will not engage with the issue of gender for two main reasons. On the one
51 hand, the community was selected because discussions around food seemed to emerge with
52 particular emphasis among users. On the other hand, the fact that the group was created fairly
53 recently in 2017 made it an interesting case study compared to other mixed-gender online
54 communities already previously and amply discussed by the author. The second
55 consideration calls into question the process of self-reflexivity. Berger (2015:220) defines
56 reflexivity as “the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of the
57 researcher’s positionality as well as active acknowledgment and explicit recognition that this
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position may affect the research process and outcome”. In this particular context, my own **identity** as a female migrant seemed to facilitate **access to and interaction with my sample**, which might not have been possible or easily conceded **had I been** a male researcher. In thinking about this, I echo Finlay’s argument that reflexivity produces research that is *co-constituted* by researchers and participants (2002). **In this particular context then**, self-reflexivity represented a journey of introspection where different experiences and materialities intersected to create a fascinating portrait of diasporic life.

As for the practicalities involved in conducting the interviews, it has to be noted that these were performed in Italian in order to investigate the deep and often unconscious meanings attributed to food that only native language can convey. **Information about the content of the interview was provided in advance and respondents were required to sign a consent form.** Permission to record the interview was obtained. Interviews were conducted in public places or on Skype, they lasted between one hour and one hour and a half and were later transcribed and translated into English. All respondents agreed to be quoted either with their full names or with their initials. Respondents were from different age ranges (23 to 50 years old), geographical provenience, professional life and motivations for being in London. However, they all similarly used a wide range of information and communication technologies as part of their daily ‘media diet’. Skype, WhatsApp and Facebook are used almost on a daily basis to communicate with friends and family. In addition to these tools, one of the participants also mentioned using Line (a free messaging and video calls application) and Hangouts (Google’s communication platform). The sample recruited for the present research is of course only partially representative of the population of Italians living in London. According to recent statistics (Statista, 2018), the number of female Italian citizens officially registered as resident in London is 122.415 compared to 139.170 males (Statista, 2018). Data from 2014 also shows us that 74 percent of Italians are under 34 years and come from the north of Italy (55%), with Lombardy and Veneto as the most representative regions. Among these, 89 percent of Italians have a high school diploma, 58 percent hold a degree, and one in five holds a doctoral degree. The case study here observed seems to reflect the variety of educational backgrounds and geographical provenience. In particular, 4 respondents were originally from the South of Italy (Calabria, Sicily and Campania), 5 from the north of Italy and mainly from Piedmont, Lombardy and Liguria) and only one respondent from Emilia Romagna, in northeast Italy. Almost all of them hold a diploma, one – Anna – has a Master and a PhD in Languages.

Literature

In this section I will first introduce existing research on the emotional tensions existing in doing ‘family work’ within transnational contexts, with a particular focus on theories of mediated co-presence in polymedia contexts. I then discuss the role of digitally-mediated food practices and discourses in an attempt to understand how culinary practices can support interactions at a distance.

Co-presence in polymedia contexts: intimacy and proximity

The use of communication technologies by migrants is not a recent discovery in migration studies (Schiller, Basch and Szanton-Blanc, 1992; Appadurai, 1996; Vertovec, 2004). Throughout history, migrants have creatively shaped, adopted and negotiated ways of maintaining emotional and material connections with home and with other diaspora members, from letters (Borges and Cancian, 2016) and telephone calls (Vertovec, 2004) to

Internet and social media use (Dekker and Engbersen, 2014; Diminescu, 2008). In exploring ICT transnational use, scholars have highlighted the fundamental role that new media have played in building and sustaining familial intimacy through the recreation of a sense of distant co-presence (Baldassar, 2016). More importantly for the present study, ethnographic studies of migratory contexts have also observed the different ways migrants creatively use a variety of platforms “to balance distance and intimacy in communication” (McKay, 2018:137). As Madianou and Miller have noted, new media have radically transformed the experience of migration by providing opportunities for ongoing connectivity while mitigating the problem of physical and social separation (2012). In their comparative ethnography of Filipino and Caribbean transnational families, anthropologists Madianou and Miller observed the emergence of a ‘polymedia’ environment where migrants decide which communication tool they should employ in any given situation and in response to different social and emotional needs. In this particular context, Madianou and Miller’s theory provides an interesting framework for understanding the rationale behind my respondents’ creative use of media technologies. In particular, the theory proves valid insofar as it focusses on the social, emotional and moral consequences of media use, which will be here discussed in relation to how Skype is used by migrants in order to stay ‘present’ to their family.

As McKay points out (2018) the ever-expanding role of social networking sites and the advent of polymedia in transnational contexts have contributed to the emergence of creative ways of sustaining intimacy at a distance. In observing long-distance parenting between the UK and The Philippines, not only she described polymedia at the centre of a theoretical and methodological shift in global migration studies, but she also discussed the intersection between questions of visibility and intimacy in transnational contexts. The present research engages with such questions by highlighting two specific aspects that emerged with particular vigour during my interviews. First, visibility on Skype intersects with different kinds of emotional attachment to a sense of family that has lost its everyday nuances but remains nevertheless at the very centre of migrants’ practices and discourses away from home. Second, as Nicolescu (2016) observes in his study of social media use in Southeast Italy, the enhanced visibility provided by social media allows migrants to recreate different layers of intimacy.

Of particular relevance for this study is Baldassar’s extensive work on tactics of co-presence among Italian migrants in Australia and their distant kin (2008). Co-presence is defined as “the emotional support experienced as a sense of emotional closeness or ‘being there’ for each other” (Brownlie 2011, in Baldassar, 2016: 145). Baldassar documents how platforms such as Skype, FaceTime and social networking sites have made virtual co-presence possible while reinforcing the sense of ‘being there for each other’ (2007). To certain extents, the content of communication is not important *per se*, compared to the opportunity to see each other whenever and wherever needed (Licoppe and Smoreda, 2005; Wilding, 2006). On a similar note, Mirca Madianou defines *ambient co-presence* as a “peripheral, yet intense, awareness of distant others made possible through the ubiquity and affordances of polymedia environments” (2016:199). In the context of my research, the ‘always on’ pattern that Madianou has observed in her research is contradicted by my respondents, who confirmed using Skype only at the end of the day and before going to bed. Yet, the intensity of polymediated experiences creates new geographies of diasporic life that involve migrants as well as parents, who often need to acquire digital skills. Among others, Wilding confirms how this “mediated intimacy at a distance” (2006:133) has very practical and tangible consequences for all parties involved. This is further reiterated by Baldassar, who argues that ICT provide “new possibilities for sustaining intimacy across time and space, providing revolutionary and

ever more sophisticated avenues for the exchange of emotional support and for delivering a sense of emotional closeness or ‘being present’ across distance” (Baldassar et al., 2016:135). As this paper will argue, emotions are at the very centre of a sense of transnational intimacy that is renewed every time a call is made. This is supported by King-O’Riain (2015) in her study on Skype use among transnational families in Ireland. Here, *a trans-connective space is created through processes of ‘emotional streaming’*, where families negotiate “micro and highly intimate interpersonal understandings and practices of love” (262). In the discussion that follows, I expand this concept further to emphasise how routine Skype calling accounts for the creation of an everyday reality where the process of ‘doing family’ takes on a very tangible form.

Food practices, intimacy, and transnational family life

The theme of food, and its cultural significance for migrant communities and identities, has been the object of numerous sociological and anthropological analyses. Among others, Fischler (1988: 280) emphasized the extent to which food is located at the very centre of migrants’ sense of national and collective belonging as they “mark their membership of a culture or a group by asserting the specificity of what they eat”. Culinary practices have been described as an element of personal and social identification (Zontini, 2004), as *drivers* of nostalgia (Vázquez-Medina and Medina, 2015), and at the centre of community building processes (Marte, 2007). Brah (1996) discussed how food can provide transnational identities a sense of continuity *with the past*, which might alleviate the sense of disjointedness that migrants often experience when living in a new country (Bhugra and Decker, 2005; Locker et al., 2005; Philipp and Ho, 2010). In observing the centrality of food in *diasporic contexts*, scholars have paid attention to questions of authenticity (Petridou, 2001) and to the malleability of food as recipes are adapted to suit the availability of ingredients (Fonseca, 2016; Hegde, 2016). Other authors have emphasised the emotional and ‘sensory’ qualities of food (Vázquez-Medina and Medina, 2015). Along these lines, Lupton (1996:30) has observed how food “stirs the emotions” precisely because of its physical nature and sensual affordances, which “call the continuity of identity through a vivid nostalgic experience” (Vázquez-Medina and Medina, 2015:137).

As I have argued elsewhere (2017) these theories can well be adapted to the study of the role of food within the Italian diaspora. However, an additional dimension should be considered, which is how the experience of commensality takes on new material nuances when it is recreated at a distance. For Italians, sitting at the same table and consuming the same food is a celebration and a moment of joy that reinforces intimate bonds within the family (Cinotto, 2013; Ochs and Shohet, 2006; Counihan and Van Esterik, 1997). Hence, food should be considered as a *visceral experience* that connects host and home countries by blending together familiar and new tastes, smells and textures (Locker et al., 2005; Longhurst et al., 2009). This is confirmed in many studies on previous generations of Italian migrants moving to the UK (Fortier, 2000; Sprio, 2013). In this respect, food not only act as a personal, cultural and collective identity marker; at the same time, food is at the centre of circuits of love that connect the community together.

My contribution to this already solid literature is twofold: first, I am interested in exploring how mediated conversations and practices about food bring this relationship between food and migration to a whole new level of complexity. As Vázquez-Medina and Medina (2015) have noted in their research on Mexican food markets in California, the awareness of

dislocation is instrumental in encouraging families to ‘get together’ around common (food-related) reference points. Second, I am not only discussing the power of mediated performances of food, which I have discussed elsewhere (author, 2017), but also the role of Skype in **re-staging** – on a more sensory-based level of imagination – typical family routines that enhance a sense of **emotional** proximity. While contributing to existing literature on food and migration, this research hopes to address a gap in existing literature on the Italian migration. As noted, while first and second generations of Italian migrants have been observed quite extensively in the UK and in the US already, we still know very little about how Italians ‘do family’ through digital forms of connectivity. **The remaining part of this article is organised as follows: first I discuss how transnational family connections are rekindled through sharing recipes and cooking at a distance; then, I look at how transnational culinary practices enable the circulation of social capital, which I here interpret as another form of ‘doing family’ by engaging with ‘fictive’ kin such as friends. Lastly, I will conclude the discussion with a reflection on the technological asymmetries and communicative tensions emerging as part of these transnational communicative patterns.**

Discussion

Restaging family rituals at a distance

At the beginning of their journey, Ilaria (27 years old, from Sicily) and MJ (a 24 years old hairdresser from Turin) used to call their parents almost on a daily basis. Their conversations were mainly focused on their new life in London and the challenges of living abroad for the first time while working as au-pairs in the city. Within the walls of their new home in London, Skype was used to ask for support with the preparation and cooking of food, as the following quote demonstrates.

MJ: When I moved here, I used to call my mum almost every day on Skype. I usually asked her how to cook specific recipes, and she was happy to help. Now I don’t do that very often. I still do it sometimes, but not as often as at the beginning.

I asked Ilaria, who seemed to be more passionate about food, to describe a typical situation **involving the use of Skype**:

Sometimes I am desperate because I don’t know what to cook. I then text my aunts and my mum [she has a WhatsApp group with them, *author’s note*] and I list the ingredients I have in my fridge. They then come up with different options, and I decide which one I would like to make. Only after this initial conversation I call my mum on Skype [or the person who suggested the recipe, *author’s note*] so that she can explain how to cook it.

Ilaria’s words deserve further considerations. On the one hand, she – as many migrants – uses a variety of different devices depending on what is more convenient or more appropriate for a particular purpose. Among other scholars, Madianou explains that “when users have access to dozens of different applications, platforms and devices, they can easily exploit the qualities of each to compensate for the limitations of other platforms” (2016:186). In Ilaria’s case, WhatsApp supports more immediate patterns of communication that are then followed by

richer forms of connectivity, thus supporting the common view that sees migrants as protagonists of creative media adaptations and negotiations (Madianou and Miller, 2012).

On the other hand, Skype seems to be associated with a sense of 'need': a necessity that the migrant articulates in order to 'get on' with the new domestic life. Ilaria draws from a family patrimony – the ability to invent a recipe with the ingredients available randomly in the fridge – that she, perhaps, has not yet acquired. In participating to the conversation by suggesting potential recipes, the entire family takes care of the migrant, while showing empathy and understanding. From here, we can see how the process of 'doing family' in a transnational context seems to follow a linear route: first, there is a very practical need that the migrant voices out; second, the family gets involved thanks to its knowledge and expertise in running the household; third, a creative mix of technologies is used to make the most of such expertise.

The significance of a food-related cultural capital is also called into question by Anna, a 50 years old Professor from Calabria. She says that her conversations around food have less to do with the practical need that Ilaria's quote displays, and more to do with intimacy.

Recipes are an excuse; actually, we are not particularly obsessed with food. At a personal level though, this is a way of staying alive, a necessity to remember what's good about Italy, which is mainly food and art. I combine this necessity to see and call my family with good food. I call if I want to bake a particular type of bread, a focaccia for example, and they are happy to help. They are incredibly happy to share their knowledge.

Here, we can see how Skype fulfils a *visceral necessity* to recreate a sense of family through conversations around what is for Italians a very typical cultural and linguistic code: food. By recreating family moments such as cooking together or sharing traditional recipes, the transnational family stays alive, renews its bond and creates a bridge that both parts can easily navigate thanks to the 'comfortable' memories that food inspires and re-creates. It then becomes clear that Skype suits a very peculiar function that is the creation of a *trans-connective habitus*, a term I use here by merging O'Riain concept of trans-connective space (2015) and Nedelcu's habitus (2012). Not only Skype creates a space where emotions and intimacies are streamed, but it does so while providing the conditions for a *transnational everyday reality*. Here, old and new practices are negotiated and re-staged: previous routines such as cooking together and new necessities such as preparing food from scratch take on new forms that reflect the migrant's new life and the need for the family to acquire digital skills in order to remain *present*. This is mentioned by MJ in the following quote:

My parents did not know what Skype was. Sometimes they like it and they're happy to see me, other times they would rather have me home.

As I will discuss later on, media use comes with tensions and ambiguities. Here, I want to focus on the practicalities of maintaining family connections at a distance. As Baldassar notes, these relationships are affected by ability, cultural expectations and negotiated commitments (2007: 392-392). Family rituals cannot take place without the ability to use and switch platforms, the prospect/commitment that the family will provide support when needed and finally the expectation that the migrant will call – more or less frequently – in order to maintain the relationship alive. The emotional proximity enabled by Skype has an impact on the whole transnational family dynamic. MJ, for example, points out the following:

Distance has improved our relationship. Since the moment I left, the relationship between my mum and my aunt has also improved, maybe because they found something in common, which is not having me around anymore.

This is confirmed by Anna, who says that *‘through sharing recipes, our relationship is somehow confirmed and strengthened, a confirmation that this relationship is alive and necessary’*. On a similar note, Ilaria says that she always had a good relationship with her parents, but this relationship has also been transformed by the distance. When in Italy, she cooks new recipes that she has invented while living in London, thus creating new experiences and memories that make food a catalyst for family time. The way transnational relationships acquire new meanings is then duplex: first, distance reinforces the *necessity* to be there and to ‘prove it’ in tangible ways; second, it also affects the way such relationships are lived when in physical co-presence. Distance, as many have argued, can bring people closer. On this issue, Madianou and Miller (2012:146) point to the potential of new media to create the “‘ideal distance’ necessary for a relationship to flourish”.

This is **further** corroborated by Anna, who recognises that since her family started to use digital media, and Skype in particular, relationships have improved:

We now know each other a little bit better. We grew closer by talking about food. For example, when I ask a traditional Christmas recipe [...] the emotional aspect is very important. It’s not just the recipe, it’s about our identity as well. Food is part of your identity, it’s what connects us to our memories, for example when I cook the same biscuits I used to eat while I was little, using the same recipe my mum used to follow.

Without discussing the theme of memory, which is beyond the scopes of this article, it is important to stress how food becomes an object that brings old memories alive and creates new ones. This is confirmed by R., a 34 years old sales assistant from Emilia Romagna.

It does help a lot. Sometimes I feel like I never left as I more or less do the same things I used to do back home. Cooking together, eating together, sharing moments of daily life around the table. The only difference is that I do this on Skype. It’s not ideal, but it’s better than nothing.

In this poignant quote, R. brings forward a new element to the discussion: the centrality of commensality. The next section will delve deeper into that.

Commensality and transnational social capital

In facilitating the formation of mediated co-presence, video-based platforms allow migrants to perform and experience different ways of ‘doing family’ in a transnational context. I will here discuss two interesting examples that allow us to reflect more deeply on the centrality of *mediated commensality* within wider practices of familyhood. The first example considers Skype use in relation to the circulation of social capital among migrants living in London and between migrants and their families. The second example specifically addresses the importance of eating together in a once common physical and social setting.

In observing the complexity of doing family work in a transnational context, this research has revealed how Skype is used by migrants to recreate a sense of family with fictive kin such as **friends**. This is evident in the following conversation **between Ilaria and MJ**:

Ilaria: We had this absurd conversation on Skype one day. We decided to cook arancini [a typical Sicilian dish, *author's note*] with MJ and the other girls. I took some pictures of the girls while they were cooking and sent them to my mum. I told her 'Look mum what they are learning today!' They [the girls] didn't know how to make arancini, so my mum was asking them how they usually cook rice in the North of Italy [Ilaria is from Sicily, while the other girls, including MJ, are from the northern area of Italy. The way rice is cooked in order to prepare the typical Sicilian recipe is different from the way risotto - a dish from the North - is made, *author's note*]. It was an interesting evening...

MJ: Yes, the risotto night was fun [laughing, *author's note*]

Ilaria: Our families enjoyed it too. Also, it was an opportunity to meet each other's parents. I think that we [as in Italians, *author's note*] involve our parents a lot in what we do. Other friends, like my Polish friend, not so much. I never 'met' her mum but among us is different. For example, a friend of mine might say, 'my mum says hi' and I don't know her, but I say hi to her nevertheless.

A number of interesting aspects emerge here. First, Skype is used to record important socialising activities among migrants; here, food acts as a catalyst for new forms of friendship and cooperation around the table. By preparing, cooking and eating the typical food that relates to the migrant's culinary patrimony and heritage, a very tangible bond is created. Second, the shared values and understandings that surround the centrality of food and of commensality help Italians to perceive themselves as distinct from other migrants who do not share the same traditions. Third, the circulation of social capital does not seem to stop here; in calling home, families are invited to participate, to acknowledge and to share the connection that migrants have created around food discourses and practices. Food becomes, once again, an easy conversation-starter between people who do not know each other well. In this new networked environment when multiple Skype conversations are activated at the same time, thus connecting different geographies and households together, new understandings of familyhood seem to emerge.

The second example specifically addresses the importance of commensality in situations of digital togetherness. The experience of eating and drinking together is deeply rooted in the Italian culture. For example, the ritual importance of the Sunday meal is accounted for by scholars such as Cinotto (2013), Gabaccia (1998; 2000) and Mancina-Batinich (2009). Cinotto, for example, talks about a 'Sunday ceremonial' among Italian migrants in the US that is characterised by "abundance and conviviality" (2013:53-54). Among my respondents, L., a 23 years old Hospitality Management graduate from Campania, makes a similar argument:

[...] the Sunday lunch, for example, is a typical Italian tradition of which I am particularly proud of. I have never been able to re-experience the same emotions I used to experience after spending hours at the dinner table with my family. It's amazing to see how everyone makes an effort in order to make this lunch special: those who have worked very hard during the week, those who have been cooking for days, those who cannot wait to share some good news, those who are just happy to be together. It's a very fulfilling experience.

While migrants cannot experience commensality in co-presence as they **were** used to, Skype seems to provide a valid alternative. In line with the concept of *online mealtime socialisation* that I have outlined **elsewhere** (2017), **I asked my respondents if they used Skype to re-stage situations of ‘physical commensality’ by consuming their lunch or dinner at the same time as their families gather around the table.** Although my respondents confirmed that **time lag and work reasons make it difficult to recreate this habit**, they however tend to be more flexible on special occasions such as birthdays or festivities, as the following quote from Ilaria demonstrates.

I usually eat with the kids and we also eat at different hours, which is why I don’t have dinner with them while we chat on Skype. However, on special occasions like birthdays, they [her parents, *author’s note*] video call me when the whole family is at the table, so that I can see everyone and talk to them while they are eating. This happened recently for my dad’s birthday: they called me when they cut the cake.

We can see how Skype **enables the transnational family** to experience a sense of emotional proximity that is particularly desired during special moments of celebration. It is then not surprising that food is again at the centre of such emotional practices: for Italians, **commensality** is a very intimate experience of togetherness and love, it is a pleasure of the senses, a ritual of companionship, a way of reinforcing relationships through conviviality. Nedelcu and Wyss (2016) call it an ‘ordinary co-presence’, an attempt to reproduce the ordinary. By allowing migrants to **co-celebrate** occasions such as birthdays and festivities in virtual presence, Skype actively provides migrants with a sense of ‘at-homeness’. It is argued that this is fundamental for the wellbeing of the migrant: the family is a central node of security and stability, it represents what is ‘familiar’ and well known as opposed to the challenges of living in a new environment.

That being said, it must also be noted that it is especially **on these occasions** that the problematic aspects of Skype’s emotional streaming materialise with particular intensity. As familial expectations of physical co-presence are not fulfilled, migrants feel the additional burden **of not being able to celebrate with the family**, and Skype becomes insufficient to bridge the distance. This is corroborated by Madianou and Miller, who observe how “webcam as well as phones can be accused of giving only an illusion of co-presence and being an even more poignant reminder of separation” (2012:119). This aspect **will be** discussed in the following section.

Asymmetries and tensions in family work. Feeling alone while connected

The asymmetries and tensions emerging in using Skype to re-stage family rituals mainly refer to the inevitable forces that shape the temporalities of digital media use on the one hand, and to the communicative tensions that develop when migrants are unable to return home on the other. These two dimensions overlap and affect each other in ways that future research on media and migration should probably explore further. In relation to the first aspect and bearing in mind that physical co-presence remains a privileged form of communication even in transnational contexts, I argue that Skype can in fact exacerbate feelings of nostalgia and migrants’ sense of de-territorialisation. This is evident in the quote below from Ilaria,

It's terrible because you realize that you are far away while they are still there, going on with their lives and you can't do anything about it. The feeling goes away after a few minutes when you rationalize the situation, but before you reach this point you just want to go home.

As Madianou (2014) asserts, when we discuss the concept of mediation we need to pay attention to the forces that **shape the temporalities, affordances and architectures of digital media use**. In the case study here considered, these forces are of multiple nature. First, **migrants need to adapt to a much hectic life that often leaves little space to call home whenever desired**. Second, the time difference makes is difficult to experience – as discussed – **situations of commensality even in virtual co-presence**. Third, the digital skills that parents need to learn in order to stay connected can sometimes cause frustration on both parts, thus **undermining the affective impact of digital conversations**. These technological and technical **'asymmetries' combine with a series of communicative tensions that have a more nostalgic nature and seem to especially affect migrants as they are unable to return home on certain occasions**. This is confirmed by MJ, who says that video-calling makes her feel *'extremely nostalgic. For my birthday everyone was at the table to celebrate, but I wasn't there'*. The limitations that are inherent to mediated communication emerge quite vividly here. This is further confirmed by L. in the following quote:

technologies such as Skype and WhatsApp have shortened the distances, which is positive because you don't lose contact and you feel more reassured that relationships will continue. However, I do feel quite nostalgic, especially when I realise that I am missing out on important events such as Christmas, parties, and birthdays.

The inability to return home often results in migrants' feeling guilty about not being physically present to celebrate with the family. I., a 32 years old researcher from the North of Italy, explains this very clearly:

I feel like I should be there, and Skype doesn't really help in this sense. You think it's a great alternative – and indeed it is – but as soon as you end the call, you feel overwhelmed by feelings of nostalgia, loneliness, and isolation.

Baldassar (2015) describe this **'guilty feeling'** as typical of migration processes, where the physical separation and longing for home motivate migrants' ongoing ties to their homeland through mediated forms of communication and virtual co-presence when home visits are not possible. Baldassar discusses the performative nature of guilty feelings and guilt trips in relation to a **"sense of obligation to care"** (88) for those left behind, which the present study did not seem to return as explicitly. While certainly implicit to some of the discussions I have had with my respondents, what appeared to be more compelling and guilt-inducing was the emotional distress caused by the inability to celebrate important moments with the family, which mediated communication did not seem to replicate nor to fulfil in its emotional intensity and preciousness.

Conclusions

This article has returned a dynamic and lively picture of family life in transnational contexts. In observing the role of Skype in enabling the re-staging of family rituals around food preparation, cooking and dining, I have attempted to articulate the impact of platform use in creating trans-connective spaces for transnational families to do familyhood. My findings

have indicated that transnational family work can take on many different forms and creative adaptations. In particular, the research has revealed how Skype is used (1) to maintain connections through sharing recipes and cooking at a distance; (2) to enable the circulation of social capital within the diaspora and in-between migrants and relatives; and (3) to re-create moments of commensality that were once performed in physical togetherness. The following points can also be made. First, this study contributes to existing literature on food, media and migration by highlighting the emergence of a *trans-connective habitus* where the frequent use of Skype – and the fact that the whole family participates – contributes to the creation of a transnational everyday reality that has in food its cultural and symbolical centre. Second, it is through the re-enactment of family moments such as cooking and eating together that the transnational family stays alive and renews its intimate bond. Third, this paper has also unpacked the emergence of tensions and obstacles. Such tensions mainly referred to the inevitable forces (temporalities and affordances) that shape digital media use, and to the communicative tensions that develop when migrants are unable to return home and are unsatisfied by mediated communication. Towards the end of this article I also briefly turned to the concept of guilt which, although not explicitly mentioned by my respondents, seemed to make transnational family work more difficult to perform. It is here then, in the often ambiguous and contradictory practices performed by transnational actors that the material politics of diasporic life can be fully appreciated. More research into the significance of affectivity and emotions is needed to further unpack the complexities and trajectories of global mobilities.

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